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ABSTRACT

The Appalachia Educational Laboratory's Educational Services Office has spcnsored an ongoing external evaluation of its regional exchange program since fiscal year 1979. Findings from this evaluatien helped support the decision to adopt a state consultant model strategy for all four of the office's educational programs. The model involves assigning one staff person per state to deliver services from all fcur programs to the 11 states receiving services. A formative evaluation ccmponent was built into the strategy, utilizing the previous outside evaluatcr to analyze the effects of implementatien of the model and to suggest improvements. This evaluation process is intended to operate as part of the Educational Services Office's ongoing evaluation program, to clarify adequate definitions of the state consultant model as it develops in practice, and to establish feasible outcome measures against which to judge prcgram effectiveness. (Author/PGD)

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An Evaluator's Perspective on the State Consultant Model

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INTRODUCTION

The Appalachia Educational Laboratory (AEL) Educational Services Office (ESO) is responsible for four (4) educational programs that assist state education agency (SEA), intermediate service agency (ISA) and local education agency (LEA) officials improve school practice and increase equity. These programs are: needs assessment and problem identification, regional exchange (Rx), regional services (RS), and special projects (SP).

From 1977 until the present, the ESO has grown rapidly both in size (from 3.4 professionals to 9.55) and in program complexity to meet the increased program implementation demands. ESO adopted a State Consultant Model of service delivery beginning in December 1979. The model necessitates assigning a single ESO staff person to deliver services from the four ESO programs to a given state.

ESO has sponsored an external program evaluation of its Rx program for some time. The evaluation findings helped support the decision to adopt a State Consultant Model strategy and to structure initial State Consultant operations.

This paper describes the use of evaluation findings to structure the State Consultant Model and outlines planned evaluation activities for this contract year to assess the model's implementation.

EVALUATION FINDINGS SUPPORTING THE STATE CONSULTANT MODEL

In late FY79, the Appalachia Educational Laboratory (AEL) Regional Exchange (Rx), together with the Systems Support Services project of the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, commissioned a formative evaluation of Rx operations. The purpose of this evaluation activity was to provide information to the AEL Rx staff that they could use in refining programs, services and organization for FY80-82.

There were two phases to this evaluation effort. The first summarized evaluation data from the 1977-1979 regional and state workshops. The second validated Rx Advisory Committee support for proposed FY80-82 Rx activities. The author of this paper served as the external evaluator for this FY79 effort. Since the ESO staff had proposed reorganizing the service delivery of its four programs around the State Consultant Model, data from the Rx Advisory Committee concerning their support for this decision and their preferences for its operations was important information gathered through this evaluation effort. The formative evaluation findings influenced the installation of the State Consultant Model in two ways. First, since the Advisory Committee strongly favored the State Consultant Model to alternative ESO staffing configurations (Sanders, 1980), the ESO staff could proceed with confidence to install the State Consultant Model. Second, the Advisory Committee opinions concerning State Consultant operations defined initial parameters and characteristics of the model. The Committee recommended that:

1. ESO retain the state education agency (SEA) as its primary client but expand the numbers and types of SEA personnel with whom the ESO interacts directly. These personnel include: the chief state school officer, SEA cabinet officers, curriculum and instruction content specialists, in addition to dissemination specialists.

2. ESO retain the brokering role it performs so effectively so that its SEA clients rely on ESO's knowledge of persons and resources working in critical r&d areas.

3. ESO staff spend more time on-site working directly with SEA staffs. Through this visibility, the ESO staff could identify a cadre of individuals most requiring or benefiting from ESO services. The ESO staff would also increase their understanding of the SEA organization and operations and refine an array of services differentiated according to individuals' r&d information, technical assistance and training priorities.

4. ESO hold the SEA more responsible for using the outcomes of ESO services in school improvement programs. ESO staff would become more involved in the SEA's implementation of ESO services with intermediate service agency (ISA) and local education agency (LEA) clients (Bourexis, 1980).

ESO used these SEA client recommendations to structure initial State Consultant Model operations. State Consultants are required to develop state plans for a six month period. These plans ask that consultants name the SEA key actors they involve in defining and delivering ESO services. These key actors include the chief state school officer, his/her

deputies, curriculum and instruction specialists, dissemination specialists, state board members, and in some instances, representatives of insititutions of higher education.

Consultants plan technical assistance tasks within the framework of Rx and Rx objectives, enabling ESO management to view plans across states and consultants and understand total current ESO activity at any given time. These initial objectives establish the specific ESO projects and technical assistances services to be completed this year. Consultants are required to select objectives according to needs assessment information available from the state. This comparison process becomes even more important as the RS program proceeds with its needs assessment project.

In the first quarter of this contract period, state consultants visited and spent an appreciable amount of time in 10 of the 11 states receiving services. ESO has allocated financial support for numerours such visits throughout this year. In most instances, the ESO staff assigned previously to the state accompanied new Consultants on the initial visit to provide an appropriate entry for new staff.

Although the content of much of a State Conultant's work remains somewhat undefined, owing to the committment to let the work "emerge" from SEA state clients' needs and priorities, it seems that each State Consultant will provide technical assistance in several areas by the end of this contract year. These areas include: state sponsored dissemination activities using partial funding support from the Rx program; 3 regional

nad 2 job-alike workshops; visible uses of this information and training in a SEA-sponsored school improvement effort; high-priority, short-term r&d projects (for 7 of the 11 states); replications of ESO-sponsored activities by states; participation from states in a regional conference and the National Dissemination Forum; contributions to the Rx Bulletin and Educational R&D Report, and; dissemination of r&d results and/or products, particularly in the area of oral and written communication.

EVALUATION TO SUPPORT INSTALLING THE STATE CONSULTANT MODEL

Delivering services according to the State Consultant Model is a new ESO undertaking begun only in December 1979. The model is a major organizational innovation on ESO's part, one that will produce a "transition" situation for some months as state consultants begin to interact with states and provide services. This entire contract year can be said to be a transition year.

It is critical that information pertinent to programs operations be gathered and presented to ESO staff for attention. ESO staff anticipated these information needs and reacted in two ways. First, ESO combined the Rx and RS evaluation so that the State Consultant Model could be better examined across its major programs. Second, ESO retained the external evaluator involved in the FY79 effort to conduct the FY80 activities. In this way ESO hoped to capitalize on the evaluator's present understanding of program and relationships with both ESO staff and SEA clients.

To date, sufficient evaluation planning has occurred to opose a number of program evaluation characteristics or guidelines that will direct this contract year's efforts.

The State Consultant Model Evaluation is a Component of the Larger ESO Program Evaluation

The State Consultant Model is not a program in itself, but rather a strategy for delivering a program of services to clients. The model is program-dependent, deriving its form and function from the particular array of services involved. Any relationships between delivery and program outcome became significant only when the model is viewed within its program contest.

Studying the model apart from its program is to focus inappropriately on "process" independent of "content". If the model were considered in isolation from the program its interrelationships with the larger program would not be found, nor could outcomes be tied or contributed to service delivery.

There are two areas of evaluation concern related to ESO programs:

- o the extent to which ESO program operations occur as planned; and
- o the extent to which ESO program outcomes contribute to the improvement of school practice.

Sanders refers to this first concern as ". . . monitoring the achievement of program milestones" (Sanders, 1980, p. 8). The second concern asks initially, "what are the identifiable outcomes of ESO service delivery" where outcomes are r&d based information, technical assistance and training.

The second concern addresses both short-term, immediate outcomes, (r&d based information, training and technical assistance provided to SEA clients) and long-term outcomes (application of this information, training and assistance to school improvement efforts).

Viewed within its program environment, evaluation questions related to the State Consultant Model include:

- Does the State Consultant Model provide coordinated information, technical assistance and training services to SEA clients?
- Does the State Consultant Model contribute to the application of these services to school improvement efforts?

The State Consultant Model Evaluation Focuses on Model Description

At the present time, the State Consultant Model is defined only as a decision to assign ESO program staff to specific states and to charge them with service delivery across the four ESO programs (Sanders, 1980). ESO speaks of "transporting" the State Consultant Model from the Northwest Regional Laboratory, but realizes of course, that such an innovation in service delivery cannot be "transported" intact between organizational settings. At present, no one can say with certainty what the model will look like as it eventually functions in the ESO setting. It will probably mirror the original concept in some fashion, but will undoubtedly differ markedly from it as well.

It is the responsibility of the program evaluation during the first year of the State Consultant Model implementation to describe the actual model as it emerges from program operations. As such, the evaluation will depend heavily on case study techniques, using direct observation, client

interviewing, and secondary data analysis to construct model definitions. "Definitions" is intentionally plural, just as the State Consultant Model is program-dependent, it is consultant-dependent. The model will expectedly take alternative forms as individual consultants interact with distinct state organizational settings. The level and precision of model description will need to allow for these variations.

The State Consultant Model Evaluation Establishes Feasible Outcomes Measures Against Which to Judge Program Effectiveness

ESO programs operate through intermediate organizations delivering services directly to SEA clients. The ESO programs achieve their intended short-term outcomes (Bourexis, 1980). Participants view Rx workshops as valuable, appropriate, and applicable activities. RS projects are conducted and clients are satisfied with their products.

Yet, the goal of these programs is to increase the use of r&d-based results in dissemination and school improvement programs. The plausible relationships between direct services to SEA personnel and impact on teachers, principals, school board members are relative unknowns.

A major purpose of this evaluation is to, in Columbus' words, "To discover long-term program outcomes and land on them." Evaluation can begin to document the applications of direct service outcomes (e.g. information obtained from a Rx workshop, an occasional paper developed from an RS project) on SEA, ISA and LEA school improvement efforts.

Once identified, these outcomes can then hopefully be traced or related to one or more ESO services. They become, eventually, measures against which the ESO staff and interested third parties can assess the worth or effectiveness of ESO programs.

State Consultant Model Evaluation Is a Formative Evaluation Effort

Program evaluation is often categorized as either summative or formative. Summative evaluation refers to information used to judge the overall merit or worth of a particular program. Summative evaluation activity concentrates on decisions to continue or cease operation a program. In contrast, formative evaluation activity focuses on developing programs with the intent of providing information used in altering or modifying the program.

The State Consultant Model is a service delivery strategy only recently introduced into ESO operations. The ESO staff needs information to help them understand the developmental nature of the model and to adjust operations. This requires a formative evaluation effort, one which encourages the dynamics of the model as it is installed and one that facilitates the model's development.

The evaluation proceeds directly from the ESO staff's information needs, given the program decisions they face immediately concerning the State Consultant Model. They need to know such items as:

- Are state consultants planning activities in accordance with state expressed r&d information, technical assistance, and training needs?

- Are state consultants spending time with key actors in SEA?
- What services are actually extended as a result of the consultant's interactions?
- Are SEA clients satisfied with the services?
- Are ESO operations supporting the State Consultant's activities?

SUMMARY

Evaluating program innovation such as the State Consultant Model is a formative effort requiring evaluation staff and ESP program staff to work closely to define ESO information needs and therefore, evaluation concerns. In providing timely and credible information to ESO related to operations decisions they encounter, the evaluation also assumes responsibility for further defining the model as it is implemented, establishing appropriate short and long-term ESO service outcomes, seeking relationships between these services and outcomes, and putting into place adequate program definition necessary to judge eventually the program's effectiveness.

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